Don't Just Stand There Looking Up
June 5, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Acts 1:6–14

"Why do you stand looking up to heaven?"
Acts 1:11 (NRSV)

We are not permitted the luxury of gazing at Jesus' feet. No, we must get on with Jesus' work.

Peter J. Gomes
Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living

Startle us, O God, with the beauty of the world, come to full bloom this morning, and your love, which lives among us. Startle us with your truth and goodness and grace, and this day particularly, remind us of the privilege and challenge and blessing of being your church, the body of Christ in the world, in this place. Amen.

A few weeks ago, my colleague Calum MacLeod was making his daily run across Chestnut Street to Starbucks and saw a group of tourists standing on the sidewalk watching the demolition of Westminster House immediately behind this building. There is something irresistible about the demolition of a building. It was dramatic and violent: a huge claw taking bites out of the brick façade; a small bulldozer on the second floor pushing bricks and chunks of concrete and plaster and metal through a gaping hole in the wall. It was mesmerizing. I spent a fair amount of time myself watching. So a group of out-of-towners was standing on the sidewalk watching all this, and Calum overheard a woman in the group say, "What a shame: that beautiful Gothic church coming down to make way for another high-rise." Fortunately, Calum was able to correct her and say, "Pardon me: to the contrary; what you are seeing is a church being built, a beautiful century-old building being expanded with a wonderful new building to serve its people and the city in a new century." Knowing Calum, he turned on the brogue, absolutely charmed them, and before it was over had three new pledges for Project Second Century.

It is a great day in the life of Fourth Presbyterian Church. I am well aware that pride is one of the seven deadly sins, but I'm proud of us today—sinfully proud of what we are doing.

What we are doing this morning when we officially break ground on the site immediately west of here began a century ago when the leaders of this congregation decided to buy this site, on Pine Avenue, an unpromising dirt road, populated by taverns and boarding houses, and then hired the best church architect in America to design a beautiful church building. Another chapter in the story was

written in the 1950s with the decision to build a facility for young adults, Westminster House. A very important chapter was in the 1960s and ‘70s when urban America was in chaos and urban churches were either selling out and moving to the suburbs or locking the doors and erecting a chain link fence around the entire property to keep out what was happening in the city. At just that moment, Fourth Presbyterian Church made a huge and courageous commitment by opening the doors and inviting the city in, developing new programs for city children and older adults and a counseling center to serve urban people. We wrote another chapter in the ‘80s with expanded programs to support the homeless and hungry, expanded social services, expanded tutoring and health and education ministries. In the ‘90s we launched a building program to integrate the two separate buildings and add accessible and convenient entrances and restored this magnificent sanctuary. And now, a bright, shining, beautiful new modern building that will provide desperately needed space for our children’s and youth programs, which have grown dramatically; adult education and seminar rooms; meeting places for all the groups that gather here; a dining room, kitchen, and new chapel; a day school; and a warm and welcoming atrium.

Our part of the story began a little over a decade ago with a partnership to build a high-rise over our property, with the church occupying the first five stories. That partnership would have yielded about half the money needed for our space and to build a community center in Cabrini-Green. We called it Project Light. Our neighbors objected; we never gained the political support we needed; and after several years of meeting and planning, negotiating and occasionally arguing, we regretfully abandoned the plan.

Our space needs remained, however. So we started all over again with a careful planning process involving hundreds of church members to define again what kind of church we had become and what we aspired to be. We called the planning process “Refreshing the Vision.” The primary staff resource person and the energy behind the first phase was Dana Ferguson. The result was a plan to equip this church for a new century, to meet the new realities of our growing congregation and the amazing, dynamic neighborhood and city that is our parish. Part of the plan was for a new building.

Without the financial windfall that would have come from the sale of air rights, now the challenge was to raise enough money ourselves to do the job, estimated to be about $43 million. We had $16 million in the bank from Project Light. We began a quiet campaign in January 2010 and raised another $6 million before launching the public phase. Leaders made the difficult decision, a leap of faith actually, that we needed this new space so urgently that we were willing to assume long-term debt. And then a week before Christmas, an amazing thing happened. Two members of the congregation, Ken and Anne Griffin, who had been generous supporters of Project Light, called me with a challenge. They would match, dollar for dollar, every dollar given or pledged between Christmas and Easter of this year, up to $5.5 million. So we went to work again. The response has been extraordinary. I am pleased to announce that we have raised, toward the $5.5 million Griffin Challenge, a total of $9.4 million. So we are breaking ground this morning in full confidence that we will build the new building without long-term debt. I am very happy about that. Ken and Anne Griffin are happy. The Board of Trustees and Session are happy.

Even some of our neighbors are happy. Pretty much everybody is happy, which is a rare and good thing in the life of a church.

Everybody knows that building costs are unpredictable, even with very careful planning. We know there will be unplanned expenses. So while this accomplishment is enormous, we welcome your gifts and pledges if you have not yet responded. It has always been my dream that every member of this congregation will have an investment in and ownership of this project. So far, more than 1,200 households have pledged or given, more than any number in the past. I have signed and am in the process of signing thank-you notes for each pledge or gift we have received. The experience has been humbling and moving. I have signed thank-yous for gifts of $100,000, $200,000, $750,000 and gifts of $5, $10, $25, and $100 from faithful members of the congregation and from people I have never met, from former ministers on our staff, from seminary students, from my own children and grandchildren. Our house staff, at the end of each demolition day, went out to the site and sorted through the rubble, recovering pieces of copper tubing, plumbing fixtures, wiring, and whatever object of value they could find, sold it, and gave the money to Project Second Century.

And so an important part of what I must do this morning is say thank you

to each and every person who has contributed, large or small, to Project Second Century and to Project Light

to Ken and Anne Griffin for so creatively stimulating the broad and deep responses to this effort and for their own wonderful generosity

to dear members who made significant commitments to Project Second Century in their estates and are no longer with us

to the hundreds of church members who have invested their own love and hopes for Fourth Presbyterian Church in this project

to the committees of P2C and the chair of the project, Beth Davis, who have spent countless hours meeting, planning, monitoring

to all my colleagues on the staff, who are working daily toward the successful completion of the project

to our accomplished and distinguished professional partners , some of whom are here this morning

And first and finally, thanks be to God, whose Spirit has always led and energized and inspired this congregation down through the years. Thanks be to God, whose kingdom is always coming into the life of this world, particularly when faithful people resolve to build it with their love, their gifts, their hopes, and their lives.

Thanks be to God.

. . .

I receive a lot of interesting emails, most of which I delete when I see the subject line. One came in last week, however, that I could not resist. The subject was “Bums in My Neighborhood.” One of our wonderful neighbors wrote,

> Rev. Buchanan, I’ve noticed that your church is a magnet for a lot of bums, who come for free food, tolerate your Jesus pitch, and then lounge around my neighborhood for most of the day, begging and accosting neighborhood residents and tourists.

It went on like that and concluded,

> Bottom line: Don’t you think that if you attract bums into our neighborhood, that you are responsible for them?

I was surprised, and then a little angry, but after thinking about it for a while, I concluded that it’s about the nicest thing anybody ever said about this church. I concluded that Jesus would like knowing about the reputation one of his churches earned. We did respond to the neighbor and informed him that our guests—we prefer “guests” to “bums”—who come daily to our Social Service Center and Sunday Night Supper and noontime sack-lunch distribution agree not to solicit around the church. We informed him that we do not, ever, impose our religion uninvited on anyone, particularly not our guests. We informed him that those of us who work here know that the needy and homeless and hungry come to Michigan Avenue because that’s where the food and money is. Our responsibility, we believe, is to offer our guests a little dignity, a little kindness, a little respect as fellow human beings, which, as our neighbor so eloquently demonstrated, they don’t often receive. Dear to us is the audacious belief that the homeless, hungry man or woman is a child of God. Dear to us is our Lord who commanded us to love one another as we have been loved and to treat others as we would hope to be treated ourselves.

And so I regard our unhappy neighbor’s message as a compliment and a wonderful affirmation of what this church is about, what following Jesus is about, what Christian faith is about.

Our focus is here: this neighborhood, this city, this world, not some other world.

There is an incident at the very beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, the first and earliest history of the Christian church, that sets the direction:

The disciples are with the risen Christ. They ask a familiar question: “When will you return and bring your work to a successful conclusion?” People have been asking and fabricating answers to that question ever since. With predictable frequency down through history, a leader does the calculations, names the date, time, and place, for Christ to return and the world to end; his followers sell all they have, say good-bye to their friends, and gather on the designated hilltop to wait. It happened just two weeks ago. An obscure eighty-eight-year-old civil engineer and Christian radio station owner predicted that Christ would return on May 21 at 6:00 p.m. to gather the saved and whisk them off to heaven, leaving the rest of us to cope with

terrors and tragedies that are coming. Predictably some people sold all, said good-bye, and waited. We're inclined to find humor in this, but it is, I think, sad and sometimes tragic. A Russian teenager was so frightened that she would be left behind that she committed suicide.

Jesus tells the disciples that no one knows the time: that is, it's none of your business. More to the point, you have plenty of important business to attend to on earth.

And then the Ascension: the return of the risen Christ to the God who sent him and who lived and died and rose again in him. We Presbyterians don't often celebrate the Ascension, in part because we can't seem to let go of incipient literalism. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, is not a newspaper reporter but an artist painting a picture to assure believers that their Lord is with God, that Jesus Christ did not just disappear into nothingness but is with God and reigns with God and is Lord of all.

It is a precious belief: Jesus Christ reigns and is the reality before and above all reality. His love, which he lived and died for, is not dead but the final governing reality in the world. It is what we have to offer one another when the bottom falls out: when a spouse of fifty years dies in the middle of the night; when the long-awaited child is stillborn or born with special needs; when the test comes back positive; when the boss calls you in and you're downsized; when you fail the exam and are rejected from the school you dreamed of attending. When the bottom falls out, we hold on to one another and whisper, Jesus Christ reigns and is Lord of all, forever and ever.

And then the most wonderful thing happened. Two men in white robes show up. Jesus is gone, and they ask the disciples, who are gazing up into heaven in awe and wonder and grief and maybe fear about what's coming next, ask them a wonderful question: "Why are you standing there, looking up into the sky?"

Religion has always been inclined to escapism: to be about what my first professor of religion in college used to call "Pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by."Christianity has always been misinterpreted by those who would ignore or withdraw from this world to wait for the promised world to come, those who are suspicious of this world, disdain this world, keep this world at arm's length, and who use the word "worldly" as a term of derision rather than a beautiful, earthy indication of God's gift of creation, of this world, of sky and mountains, grass and flowers, newborn babies and lively children and wise elderly, this world of laughter and love and passion and ecstasy.

It is this world God created and called good and loves enough to send his only Son into it, to live in it and die for it. This faith of ours is a radically worldly faith, a call to live in this world with faithfulness and courage and passion and great, great love.

Why are you looking up? The focus is down here; your life is down here; all the people you love are down here; your most authentic life is down here in the midst of all the messiness and frailty and sin and need and unselfishness and kindness and joy.

One of my heroes and saints is the late Don Benedict. Don was the Director of the old Chicago City Missionary Society, an urban ministry organization committed to ministry in the city, particularly among and with those most powerless, voiceless, those without much by way of justice and kindness. Don was absolutely fearless, stirred up a lot of a trouble, and was consistently criticized by those whose Christianity was otherworldly, who wanted a pie-in-the-sky religion, not a religion that focused on conditions in public housing, racial discrimination, violence in the streets, underfunded schools. Don used to say—and I have always regarded it as a kind of personal mission statement—that "the mission of the urban church is to keep alive the rumor that there is a God."

God can seem pretty distant from a modern American city.

So that is why we are here: to remind the world—this unique neighborhood with its crowds of busy shoppers, its ambulances speeding through traffic, sirens blaring, police cars and traffic officers, buses and cabs, high-end shops and restaurants, its lonely and troubled, its anxious and depressed, its hungry and homeless—that there is a God, a God who came among us in Jesus Christ, a God who loves the world and everyone in it with an everlasting love that will never give up on this world or on any one of us, a God who has been remembered and worshiped here on this spot for a century and will continue to be remembered and worshiped and followed for years and decades and, yes, centuries ahead.

Thanks be to God.